Received: 7 March 2019 | Revised: 10 October 2020 | Accepted: 16 October 2020

DOI: 10.1111/peps.12432

PERSONNEL PSYCHOLOGY WILEY

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# What are the career implications of "seeing eye to eye"? Examining the role of leader–member exchange (LMX) agreement on employability and career outcomes

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## Abstract

Are there career benefits to leaders and followers agreeing about the quality of their leader–member exchange (LMX) relationship? Is LMX disagreement always detrimental for a follower's career? Can the examination of LMX agreement

Funding information This research was supported by a grant from the European Commission within the Fifth Framework, Project ID: IST-2000-31070. Indicator: A cross-cultural study on the measurement and enhancement of employability among ICT professionals working in small and medium-sized enterprises.

Olga Epitropaki and Anders Friis Marstand contributed equally to this work.

as a substantive variable help us cast new light on some of the inconclusive findings of past research on LMX and career outcomes? These questions motivate our research. Using theories of social exchange and sponsorship, and responses from 967 leader–follower dyads of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) professionals in seven European countries, we examined the role of LMX agreement on subjective and objective career outcomes. After conducting polynomial regression combined with response surface analysis, we found that both follower-rated and leader-rated employability were higher when the leader agreed with the follower at a high level of LMX (vs. a low level of LMX). In case of disagreement, strong support was found for leader-rated employability being higher when the leader's perceptions of LMX exceeded those of their follower. Furthermore, follower-rated employability was found to mediate the relationship between LMX (dis)agreement and perceived career success, promotions, salary, and bonuses. Support was also found for the mediating role of leader-rated employability in the case of perceived career success, promotions, and salary but not for bonuses. Our findings highlight the importance of LMX (dis)agreement for career outcomes and further point to the possibility of employability offering an alternative explanation for the mixed findings of past LMX–career research.

**KEYWORDS**
career outcomes, employability, leader–member exchange agreement

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

As the nature of work is rapidly changing due to technological changes, economic recessions, global competition, and pandemics, uncertainty concerning the nature and future existence of jobs prevails (e.g., Barley, Bechky, & Milliken, 2017; Brown, Green, & Lauder, 2001; Callanan, Perri, & Tomkowicz, 2017; Coibion, Gorodnichenko, & Weber, 2020; Guan, Deng, & Zhou, 2020; Shoss, 2017; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002). Under these conditions, a key goal for individuals becomes their ability to maintain and enhance their attractiveness in the job market. Thus, employability, defined as "one's ability to identify and realize career opportunities" (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004, p. 23) and as "the ability to keep the job one has or to get the job one desires" (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007, p. 25), emerges as a career outcome of paramount importance. Employability facilitates movement between jobs (within and between organizations) and

has been positively linked to re-employment (De Battisti, Gilardi, Guglielmetti, & Siletti, 2016; De Vos, Forrier, Van der Heijden, & De Cuyper, 2017; Koen, Klehe, & Van Vianen, 2013).

To answer the question "what predicts employability?", prior research has examined individual difference variables, such as core self-evaluations and personality (e.g., Rodrigues, Butler, & Guest, 2019; Zacher, 2014), human capital (e.g., Van der Heijden, De Lange, Demerouti, & Van der Heijde, 2009), and situational factors such as market structure and opportunities (e.g., Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006). Surprisingly, what has received much less attention is the role of leadership and employees' interactions with their direct line manager on employability perceptions and outcomes. The few available studies have mainly focused on transformational leadership and reported positive indirect relationships between transformational leadership and perceived employability via mediating mechanisms such as job design and flow (e.g., Van der Heijden & Bakker, 2011; Xie, Baranchenko, Lin, Lau, & Ma, 2019). This is a noteworthy gap as direct leaders are important organizational gatekeepers who can facilitate or withhold employee access to resources (e.g., financial, informational, and social) and growth opportunities (Kraimer, Seibert, Wayne, Liden, & Bravo, 2011) with serious implications for development of skills and realization of potential. In that respect, leader–member exchange (LMX) can be a valuable, alas surprisingly overlooked, theoretical lens in this context.

LMX theory argues that leaders form relationships of differing quality levels with followers (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Employees in high-LMX relationships have access to more resources, information, and feedback and receive higher levels of support, autonomy, and responsibility from their managers (e.g., Dansereau et al., 1975; Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000). Managers are also more likely to provide guidance, advice, challenging assignments, and sponsorship to those in higher versus lower quality LMX relationships (Sparrowe & Liden, 2005). Such developmental and challenging work experiences can facilitate professional learning and growth and enhance a person's attractiveness in the internal and external job market (Preenen, De Pater, Van Vianen, & Keijzer, 2011).

Extant LMX research has provided mixed support for the role of the quality of leader–member relationships for career-related outcomes (e.g., Erdogan, Kraimer, & Liden, 2004; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). In their recent review of the literature, Kraimer, Seibert, and Astrove (2015) concluded that evidence for the relationship between LMX and subjective outcomes such as career satisfaction is strong. However, up until now, it is inconclusive for LMX and objective career outcomes such as salary and promotions. Kraimer et al. (2015) further urged that future research should address these mixed findings.

Despite the general acknowledgement of its important role for a person's career, employability has received limited empirical attention as a relevant career outcome of LMX. To the best of our knowledge, there is only one empirical study that has indirectly examined the role of LMX for employability. Specifically, Raghuram, Gajendran, Liu, and Somaya (2017) examined whether LMX benefits transcend organizational boundaries and influence employee career outcomes after employer change. They suggested that employees in high-LMX relationships benefit from stronger professional development, which can pay off in the form of better career outcomes not only on the internal but also on the external job market. Raghuram et al.'s (2017) study offers some first insights into the potential role of LMX for individuals' employability within and outside their current organization.

Although empirical research has hitherto been scant, recent conceptual work attempts to integrate LMX, employability, and career literatures. In their LMX and career outcomes review, Kraimer et al. (2015) proposed a two-by-two typology of career success outcomes along two dimensions: intrinsic versus extrinsic and subjective versus objective. *Intrinsic–subjective* career outcomes include career achievements that are personally meaningful for the individual based on self-perceptions (e.g., career satisfaction) whereas *intrinsic–objective* outcomes focus on meaningful assessments of career success based on verifiable outcomes (e.g., status and power). *Extrinsic–objective* career success includes externally visible and observable outcomes with instrumental value (e.g., promotions, salary, and bonuses). Finally, *extrinsic–subjective* outcomes encompass those that require self- or other-perceptions and assessments about a person's potential to succeed (such as employability assessments and perceived career success).

In our research, we use Kraimer et al.'s (2015) LMX–career success typology as a guiding framework and examine employability as a key extrinsic–subjective career outcome together with perceived career success and

extrinsic–objective outcomes (such as promotions, salary, and bonuses). By examining a broader range of career outcomes than previous LMX research, we offer a more comprehensive test of the relationship between LMX quality and career success. Most importantly, we adopt a truly dyadic perspective that can potentially help clarify some of the inconclusive findings of past LMX–career success research. Despite the explicit theoretical focus on the dyad, existing LMX research has generally fallen short of capturing both sides of the relationship, as the vast majority of studies have utilized evaluations from either the follower or the leader (e.g., Sin, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2009). Considering both sides is vital for a true relational focus, especially because prior scholarly work has shown limited convergence between leader and follower views, more specifically, sharing only 8–13% of the variance in LMX perceptions (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Matta, Scott, Koopman, & Conlon, 2015; Sin et al., 2009). Our study is a response to the repeated calls to examine LMX agreement as a substantive variable (e.g., Erdogan & Bauer, 2014; Matta & Dyne, 2015; Zhou & Schriesheim, 2009, 2010) and attempts to answer an interesting theoretical and empirical question: "Does LMX agreement (vs. disagreement) matter for career success?"

To address this question, we utilize social exchange (Blau, 1964) and sponsorship theories (Rosenbaum, 1979; Wayne, Liden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1999) and offer a set of distinct hypotheses focusing on the relationship between LMX agreement and a series of career outcomes, namely, employability (both leader- and follower-rated), perceived career success, promotions, salary, and bonuses. Social exchange theory focuses on the norm of reciprocity and posits that leader–follower relationships develop from interactions motivated by the mutual benefits that both the leader and the follower derive from these exchanges. As LMX quality increases, employees get access to more resources, support, and career development opportunities from their managers. Employees in high LMX relationships will then reciprocate by increasing their work effort, taking on more responsibility, and achieving superior performance (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Kraimer et al., 2015; Martin, Guillaume, Thomas, Lee, & Epitropaki, 2016). Such reciprocity presupposes that both the leader and the follower share similar views regarding the quality of the relationship. Both of them need to see their relationship as one of high quality so that the leader offers increased levels of support and developmental opportunities to the follower and the follower reciprocates by increasing their work efforts. As a result of this mutually beneficial relationship and the developmental experiences and stretching assignments offered by the leader, the follower will increase their portfolio of professional skills and competencies and will be seen as deserving career advancement opportunities (e.g., Xie et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the sponsored mobility perspective (Rosenbaum, 1979; Wayne et al., 1999) suggests that established organizational "elites", such as managers, pay special attention to selected members and provide sponsoring activities to help them win the career "tournament". Access to such activities helps individuals stand out from other employees and eventually obtain better career outcomes (Sparrowe & Liden, 2005; Wayne et al., 1999). When leaders and followers share the view that their LMX relationship is of high quality and socioemotional (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), the chances that the leader will actively sponsor the follower's career within the organization will increase. The leader will provide career guidance and advice, development opportunities, and stretching assignments that can facilitate the follower's learning and professional growth and increase their attractiveness in the job market (e.g., Raghuram et al., 2017).

Our study makes several contributions to the LMX and career literatures. First, we examine LMX agreement as a substantive variable of both theoretical and empirical importance that can extend our understanding of the role of LMX for career outcomes. Using social exchange and sponsorship perspectives, we make the case that LMX congruence, that is, a leader and a follower seeing eye-to-eye with regard to their LMX quality, will contribute to the employee's development of competencies that will increase their attractiveness in the internal and external job market. Although prior work has hinted at this possibility (e.g., Kraimer et al., 2015), no prior studies have explicitly addressed the role of LMX or LMX agreement on employability.

Second, we investigate the role of LMX agreement for other subjective (perceived career success) and objective (promotions, salary, and bonuses) outcomes. By examining the relationship of LMX agreement with a broad range of career success outcomes, our study attempts to cast additional light on the mixed findings of prior LMX–career research (Kraimer et al., 2015). We argue that examining both leader and follower views of the quality of the LMX

relationship can offer a more nuanced understanding of the career consequences of a dyadic phenomenon such as LMX.

Third, we examine employability as a key mediator in the relationship between LMX agreement and both subjective (perceived career success) and objective career outcomes (promotions, salary, and bonuses). As we have already discussed, convergence of leader and follower views with regard to their LMX quality will lead to increased development opportunities and career resources that can contribute to the follower's learning and growth, employability, and marketability. Such employability competencies will then be translated into tangible career outcomes (such as promotions and financial rewards), as managers will be willing to provide extra career incentives to highly marketable employees in order to convince them to stay in their current organization. This way employability represents an explanatory mechanism of the LMX agreement–career outcomes relationship.

In sum, our study utilizes Kraimer et al.'s (2015) framework and examines six career outcomes in total, three subjective (leader-rated/follower-rated employability and perceived career success) and three objective (promotions, salary, and bonuses). We examine LMX agreement as a substantive variable in this context and adopt a truly dyadic lens to investigate the role of both leader and follower LMX perspectives for subjective and objective assessments of career success.

## 2 | THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Although there is a wealth of studies and meta-analyses examining the role of LMX on employee outcomes such as job attitudes and performance (e.g., Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012; Erdogan & Bauer, 2014; Martin et al., 2016), the number of studies explicitly focusing on career-related outcomes is comparatively small and results have been mixed, especially with regard to extrinsic–objective career outcomes (Erdogan et al., 2004; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Kraimer et al., 2015; Kraimer et al., 2011; Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994; Seibert et al., 2001; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997, 2005). A possible reason for these mixed findings is that the vast majority of past studies adopted a one-sided view of the LMX relationship (most often utilizing only follower perceptions). As Krasikova and LeBreton (2012) have highlighted, such *pseudo-unilaterality* (i.e., failing to take into account perceptions of both members of the dyad) leads to misalignment of theory and methodology and fails to capture the true impact of the dyadic phenomenon. Thus, for a more rigorous test of the complex relationship between LMX and career outcomes, we need to examine both sides of the LMX coin.

As a theory of dyadic organizing and "behavioral interlocking" (Weick, 1979), LMX emphasizes the reciprocal response pattern between leaders and followers (Graen & Scandura, 1987). Still, even existing LMX agreement research is one-sided in the sense that it captures dyadic perceptions of just the leader's contributions to the relationship, rather than the reciprocal exchange of value between leader and follower (Paglis & Green, 2002). Prior LMX agreement studies (e.g., Jackson & Johnson, 2012; Matta et al., 2015) have mainly used dual-perspective LMX-7 measures asking both parties to rate the leader's delivery of value to the relationship (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden, Wayne, & Stilwell, 1993). For example, in the follower-rated measure, the follower is asked to indicate whether their supervisor understands their problems and needs. Then, in the leader-rated measure, the leader provides a self-rating of their degree of understanding of the subordinate's problems and needs (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995)—instead of indicating whether the follower understands the leader's own problems and needs. Thus, the leader's perspective of the follower's delivery of value and contribution to their relationship is not captured. Without a mirror view of the exchange quality, it is impossible to capture reciprocity, which is at the heart of LMX theory. As Maslyn and Uhl-Bien (2001) have indicated, "it is not the manager's or the subordinate's behavior per se that drives the relationship but rather the dyad partner's behavior (regardless of whether the partner is the manager or the subordinate)" (p. 706) and the reciprocation of effort in the dyad. Even if the leader puts significant effort into the LMX relationship, if the follower does not reciprocate, the relationship is likely to deteriorate. Our study adopts a reciprocal exchange

perspective and assesses the mutual contributions of both the leader and the follower to the LMX relationship (Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001; Paglis & Green, 2002).

Furthermore, a closer look at the implications of leader–follower agreement and disagreement in LMX ratings for a person's career is important, as disagreement in LMX perceptions is a common phenomenon (e.g., Gerstner & Day, 1997; Sin et al., 2009). Given that many extrinsic career outcomes such as promotions, salary, and bonuses are in the leader's discretion and that the follower's perceptions of career success and future potential can be influenced by the leader's feedback, it is not enough to rely on the follower's perceptions of the LMX relationship or on LMX agreement focused on leader's contributions alone as predictors. The leader's perceptions of the follower's delivery of value to the relationship will be of critical importance and thus both sides of the relationship and assessments of the mutual contributions of the dyad partners will matter for career outcomes. As a result, LMX agreement based on a reciprocity perspective (Paglis & Green, 2002) needs to be systematically investigated as a meaningful, substantive variable for extrinsic–subjective (employability and perceived career success) and extrinsic–objective outcomes (i.e., promotions, salary, and bonuses).

## 2.1 | LMX agreement and employability

Prior LMX agreement research has focused on antecedents such as leader and follower self-identities (e.g., Jackson & Johnson, 2012), dyadic tenure (e.g., Sin et al., 2009), and item-wording effects (Schriesheim, Wu, & Cooper, 2011). Jackson and Johnson (2012), for example, found LMX agreement to be higher when supervisors had strong relational identities or when supervisors and subordinates had similar relational identity. Sin et al. (2009) also found that agreement between leader- and follower-rated LMX increased as the length of tenure and dyadic intensity increased. With regard to LMX agreement outcomes, prior studies have examined job performance and work attitudes (e.g., Cogliser, Schriesheim, Scandura, & Gardner, 2009; Markham, Yammarino, Murry, & Palanski, 2010), turnover intentions and actual turnover (Sherman, Kennedy, Woodard, & McComb, 2012), and the frequency of conflict (Paglis & Green, 2002). Matta et al. (2015) further examined the role of LMX agreement for work engagement and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Their results showed that employee work engagement was maximized when leaders and followers agreed and that work engagement mediated the relationship between LMX agreement and OCB. There are, however, no studies that have previously examined the role of LMX agreement for career outcomes and this is an important gap our research tries to address.

Although the majority of past LMX agreement research has mainly focused on the dyadic convergence of views regarding the leader's delivery of value to the LMX relationship, we argue that a mirror view of the mutual exchange of value between leader and follower is necessary when examining career outcomes (Paglis & Green, 2002). The leader's decision to sponsor a follower's career is more likely to be based on their assessment of the follower's contributions to the LMX relationship than on the self-ratings of their own contributions. If the leader does not see mutual benefits of the LMX relationship and evidence for the follower's delivery of value, the chances are low that they will actively support the follower's career and offer them developmental opportunities that will increase their employment market value.

In our study, we especially focus on employability as an important but currently overlooked career outcome of the LMX relationship. Employability has received increased attention recently for a series of reasons related to the changing nature of work and the employment relationship (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017). Such changes involve outsourcing of not only manufacturing jobs but professional and technical jobs as well, the growth of contingent and part-time work, spreading of project-based forms of organizing as well as technological advances that replace old jobs and simultaneously create new jobs (e.g., Barley et al., 2017; Baruch & Bozionelos, 2011; Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2018). Under such circumstances, the responsibility for career management has shifted from organizations to employees, who must nowadays actively look to create career opportunities both within and outside their current work environment (e.g., Akkermans & Tims, 2017; Baruch & Bozionelos, 2011; Van Dam, Bipp, & Van Ruysseveldt, 2015).

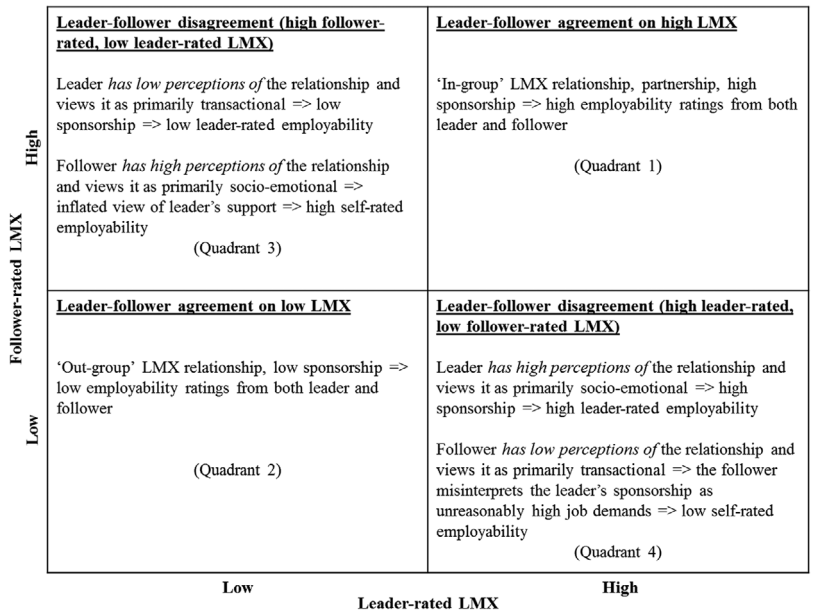


**FIGURE 1** Matrix (2 × 2) of LMX agreement and employability

We view employability through the lens of Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden's (2006) model, which regards employability as a set of competencies with five dimensions; *occupational expertise*: the extent to which a person possesses up-to-date professional knowledge and skills and can perform their job proficiently; *anticipation and optimization*: the extent to which a person anticipates changes in their work and in the job market and proactively responds to them; *personal flexibility*: a person's degree of adaptability to changes within their current organization and in the job market; *corporate sense*: the extent to which a person is an integrated member of their team and the organization and identifies themself with corporate goals and accepts collective responsibility for sharing expertise; and, last, *balance*: the capacity to achieve a balance between a person's own opposing individual interests and those of the work team and the organization.

Empirical research has hitherto measured employability either exclusively from the point of view of the employee with self-reports or, much less frequently, exclusively from the viewpoint of the direct manager. However, it is clear that a multisource view is needed in order to obtain a complete picture in the context of careers (e.g., Guilbert, Bernaud, Gouvernet, & Rossier, 2016; Van der Heijden, Gorgievski, & De Lange, 2016). Self-reports are useful because individuals act upon their own perceptions when seeking opportunities in the job market (e.g., De Battisti et al., 2016; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Vanhercke, De Cuyper, Peeters, & De Witte, 2014). Direct managers' ratings are useful too because their views of employees' employability-related competencies (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006) certainly influence objective career outcomes such as promotions, pay raises, bonuses, or reference reports. Hence, consideration of both perspectives within the same study will provide unique information that can advance our understanding of how employability relates to career success.

Our study uses polynomial regression analysis and adds to the knowledge on LMX and career outcomes by expanding the scope of research to include a much broader range of extrinsic–objective and extrinsic–subjective career outcomes than previous research and by examining both leader and follower perspectives of LMX and employability. Following Matta et al. (2015), we utilize a two-by-two matrix (see Figure 1) that juxtaposes the quality of LMX (high vs. low) with the rating source (leader vs. follower). We outline specific employability predictions in each quadrant. It is important to acknowledge that the matrix is a visual simplification of the relationships that we examine with polynomial regression and response surface analysis (Edwards, 1994, 2002; Edwards & Parry, 1993). It only shows four

combinations of leader and follower perspectives of LMX and does not fully capture the dynamic nature of congruence and incongruence lines of response surface plots. However, it is still a useful graphical depiction of our core arguments. Quadrant 1 represents LMX agreement at high levels of LMX quality (i.e., both leader and follower view their relationship as socioemotional), whereas Quadrant 2 represents LMX agreement at low levels of LMX (i.e., both leader and follower view their relationship as transactional). Quadrant 3 represents LMX disagreement where followers report higher levels of LMX than leaders do, whereas Quadrant 4 represents LMX disagreement of the opposite direction (i.e., leaders report higher levels of LMX than their followers).

Using sponsorship theory (Rosenbaum, 1979; Wayne et al., 1999), we expect that when both the leader and the follower view their relationship as high and socioemotional (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), the leader is likely to provide high levels of sponsorship to the follower, which can take the form of increased access to resources (informational, relational, financial, and material), stretching assignments, and a variety of developmental opportunities that will enhance the follower's employability competencies. In a high-LMX relationship, where both parties share the view of a mutually beneficial, empowering exchange, both the leader and the follower will have high perceptions of the follower's employability and attractiveness in the internal and external job market (e.g., Bauer & Erdogan, 2016; Kraimer et al., 2015). Thus, in Quadrant 1, we expect high employability ratings from both the leader and the follower. In the opposite type of agreement, that is, when both the leader and the follower agree that their LMX relationship is of low quality and perceive it as mainly transactional, it is unlikely that the leader will sponsor the follower's career and invest extra attention and resources to offer them increased developmental opportunities. Thus, in Quadrant 2, we expect both the leader and the follower to rate the follower's employability as low.

***Hypothesis 1A***: Follower-rated employability is higher when the leader is in agreement with the follower at a high level of LMX than it is when the leader is in agreement with the follower at a low level of LMX.

***Hypothesis 1B***: Leader-rated employability is higher when the leader is in agreement with the follower at a high level of LMX than it is when the leader is in agreement with the follower at a low level of LMX.

## 2.2 | LMX disagreement and employability

Let us now consider the effects of LMX disagreement (see Figure 1, Quadrants 3 and 4). In Quadrant 3, there is discrepancy between the leader's and follower's perception of LMX in the sense that the leader views the relationship as being of low quality and transactional, whereas the follower views it as high and socioemotional. In this case, the leader does not provide sponsorship and extra resources as they do not see the employee as worthy of the extra investment. The leader is thus likely to rate the follower's employability as low. However, the follower views the LMX relationship as high and believes that the leader provides them with sufficient support and development. They will thus be likely to have an inflated view of their competencies and rate their own employability as high. In Quadrant 4, we observe the opposite situation, that is, the leader views the relationship as high and socioemotional, whereas the follower views it as low and primarily transactional. In this case, given the leader's positive evaluations of the LMX relationship we expect the leader to sponsor the follower's career and offer them a range of developmental experiences such as increased responsibility, extra tasks, and stretching assignments. In this scenario, we expect the leader to rate the follower's employability as high. However, the follower, who does not view the relationship as socioemotional, may fail to see the developmental nature of the assignments offered by the leader as sponsorship. They will view the extra responsibilities and assignments negatively and experience their job demands as unreasonably high and overwhelming (e.g., Sherman et al., 2012). The extra tasks will feel more like chores and punishment and less like sponsorship as was the leader's intention. Thus, in Quadrant 4, we expect the follower to rate their employability as lower.

***Hypothesis 2A***: Follower-rated employability is higher when the follower's perception of LMX is higher than the leader's, than it is when the follower's perception of LMX is lower than the leader's.

***Hypothesis 2B***: Leader-rated employability is higher when the leader's perception of LMX is higher than the follower's, than it is when the leader's perception of LMX is lower than the follower's.

### 2.3 | The mediating role of employability

We further expect employability to play an important role for objective and subjective career outcomes. Employability has, by definition, career enhancement properties (Mäkikangas, De Cuyper, Mauno, & Kinnunen, 2013; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006; Van der Heijden et al., 2009). One could argue that employability assessments are more proximal consequences of interpersonal processes (such as LMX) than objective career outcomes (such as monetary rewards). Objective outcomes can be viewed as distal consequences of the person's potential (Bozionelos et al., 2016; Ramaswami & Dreher, 2007). As Raghuram et al. (2017) point out, "the support, sponsorship, and opportunities embedded in high-quality LMX relationships are likely to provide employees with a 'developmental punch' that amplifies their learning, professional growth, and motivation" (p. 404). Such a "developmental punch" will be important for a person's marketability and assessment of their potential within and outside organizational boundaries (Van der Heijden et al., 2016) and will further influence the decisions about promotions and monetary rewards.

Based on the sponsorship perspective (Rosenbaum, 1979), leaders will be more likely to sponsor a high-potential and marketable employee for further advancement within the organization and for higher levels of financial rewards and incentives versus an employee with low employability assessments. In competitive labor market conditions, organizations and managers will go the extra mile to keep highly employable employees with high levels of occupational expertise, anticipation and optimization, corporate sense, personal flexibility, and balance. Losing such employees to competitors will be costly and, as a result, extra career incentives (such as promotions, higher salaries, and bonuses) are likely to be offered to increase the chances of retention. High assessments of employability (both leader- and follower-rated) will also have implications for a person's sense of self-worth, career satisfaction, and global perceptions of one's career as successful.

Prior studies have indeed provided support for employability predicting subjective career outcomes such as career satisfaction as well as objective ones such as salary and promotions (e.g., Bozionelos et al., 2016; De Vos, De Hauw, & Van der Heijden, 2011; Van der Heijden et al., 2009). We therefore argue that employability is an important mediating mechanism that can explain how convergence or divergence of leader and follower views of their LMX relationship will subsequently be translated into career success perceptions, salaries, bonuses, and promotions.

***Hypothesis 3A***: Follower-rated employability mediates the relationship between LMX (dis)agreement and (a) perceived career success, (b) promotions, (c) salary, and (d) bonuses.

***Hypothesis 3B***: Leader-rated employability mediates the relationship between LMX (dis)agreement and (a) perceived career success, (b) promotions, (c) salary, and (d) bonuses.

## 3 | METHOD

### 3.1 | Sample and procedure

A total of 1,127 employees and 988 supervisors from seven European countries participated in the study. Data were collected as a part of a multipronged study on employability issues of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) professionals in small- and medium-sized companies (SMEs).[1] In total, 17,860 emails were sent to ICT professionals via the databases of relevant professional associations in each country. In the emails, we explained the scope of

[1] The same dataset (or subsets of it) has been previously used in Bozionelos et al. (2016), Van der Heijde et al. (2018), and Van der Heijden et al. (2010), but the relationships of interest examined in those articles were different from the relationships studied in the present one. The study was exempted from an IRB review by the Research Ethics Office of Durham University because it involved the analysis of completely anonymous secondary data.

the study and clarified the eligibility criteria, which specified that in order to take part in the study respondents had to be working full-time in a company employing 25–250 people. It was also explained that each respondent would receive a confidential personal feedback report after completion of the questionnaire. A customized web-tool was designed for our study to automatically generate the feedback reports.

A total of 1,905 ICT professionals (10.6% response rate), who fulfilled the eligibility criteria, agreed to participate in the study and received a unique identification code. They were also asked to forward this code to their direct manager together with the leader survey link so that they could complete the leader-rated measures. All surveys were administered in the local language of the specific country. Prior to the administration of the questionnaires, all questions were translated into each language and then back-translated into English to ensure that the translated versions of the questionnaire captured the same constructs as the English version (Brislin, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973; Hambleton, 2005). In three countries (Norway, Poland, and the United Kingdom), data were collected through both online survey and paper-and-pencil questionnaires as requested by the respective research teams, whereas all remaining countries opted for online survey only. After elimination of questionnaires with incomplete information and nonmatching data, subsequent analyses were based on a final matched sample of 967 leader–follower dyads. This represents a 50.8% response rate (of the 1,905 employees who had originally agreed to take part in this study). Of these, 11.8% were German employees, 11% were Greek, 16.5% Italian, 8.1% Dutch, 17% Norwegian, 18.7% Polish, and 17% were British. Male respondents accounted for 71.8% of the sample. Mean employee age was 34.57 years ($SD$ = 8.34 years), and mean organizational tenure was 4.72 years ($SD$ = 4.45 years). Of the respondents, 11.7% had managerial responsibility. Twenty-one percent had a high school degree or equivalent, 51% a bachelor's/college degree, and 27% a postgraduate degree. The mean annual salary was 26,045 euros and the mean earnings beyond base salary were 1,380 euros. British pounds were converted into euros using the yearly average 1.46 exchange rate. Of the employees, 29.1% indicated that they currently had a mentor at work. Males accounted for 75.3% of the leaders and their mean age was 41.56 years ($SD$ = 7.83). It is also important to note that in 13.5% of the 967 dyads, the leader had rated more than one employee (ranging from 2 to 9).

## 3.2 | Measures

### 3.2.1 | Follower-rated measures

*Leader–member exchange*

In order to assess the quality of the leader–member relationship, an adapted version of LMX-7 was used (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Scandura & Graen, 1984). It has seven items with responses obtained on a 5-point scale. Minor item wording and scale anchor changes were implemented to the original scale as a result of the translation–back translation process (Cortina et al., 2020; Heggestad et al., 2019). For the first six items, the scale anchors ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). The specific items are as follows: "To what extent do you know how satisfied your manager is with what you do?", "How well do you feel that your manager understands your problems and needs?", "How well does your manager recognize your potential?", "What are the chances that your manager would help you solve problems in your work?", "Regardless of the amount of formal authority your manager has, what are the chances that he/she would 'bail you out' at his/her expense?", and "I have enough confidence in my manager that I would defend and justify his/her decisions if he/she were not present to do so". For the seventh item "In general, how would you characterize your working relationship with your manager?", the scale anchors ranged from 1 (*extremely ineffective*) to 5 (*extremely effective*) ($\alpha$ = .88).

*Employability*

Follower-rated employability was measured using the revised 22-item short form (Van der Heijden et al., 2018) of the 47-item employability five-factor instrument (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006; Van der Heijden et al., 2009).

Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden's (2006) scale is the only validated instrument to provide both self-rated and leader-rated employability assessments and it has been used in several prior studies (e.g., Lysova, Jansen, Khapova, Plomp, & Tims, 2018; Oostrom, Pennings, & Bal, 2016; Stoffers, Hendrikx, Habets, & van der Heijden, 2019; Van der Heijden & Bakker, 2011; Van der Heijden et al., 2016). It utilizes a 6-point response format that assesses five dimensions of employability: *occupational expertise* (e.g., "I consider myself competent to weigh up and reason out the 'pros' and 'cons' of particular decisions on working methods, materials, and techniques in my job domain" [scale anchors are as follows: 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *not really*, 3 = *not very*, 4 = *fairly*, 5 = *sufficiently*, and 6 = *extremely*]), *anticipation and optimization* (e.g., "I consciously devote attention to applying my newly acquired knowledge and skills" [scale anchors are as follows: 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *fairly often*, 5 = *often*, and 6 = *very often*]), *personal flexibility* (e.g., "How easily would you say you can adapt to changes in your workplace?" [scale anchors are as follows: 1 = *very badly*, 2 = *fairly badly*, 3 = *not very well*, 4 = *fairly well*, 5 = *well*, and 6 = *very well*]), *corporate sense* (e.g., "I support the operational processes within my organization" [scale anchors are as follows: 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *fairly often*, 5 = *often*, and 6 = *very often*]), and *balance* (e.g., "I achieve a balance in alternating between reaching my own work goals and supporting my colleagues" [scale anchors are as follows: 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *scarcely*, 3 = *not to all that great a degree*, 4 = *to a fairly great degree*, 5 = *to a great degree*, and 6 = *to a considerable degree*).

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results using EQS 6.2 (Bentler, 2006) suggested that the five-factor model had a reasonable fit to the data: $\chi^2(199) = 1{,}000.45$, $p < .001$; CFI = .89; GFI = .91; RMSEA = .07. They also provided support for convergent validity as all factor loadings were statistically significant with critical *z*-values ranging from 12.21 to 23.43 ($p < .05$) and standardized loadings ranging from .46 to .80. We further tested a second-order CFA to examine whether the five first-order factors can be explained by a higher order one-factor structure. Results suggest that the second-order CFA model had a reasonable fit to the data, $\chi^2$ (204) = 1,021.42, $p < .001$; CFI = .88; GFI = .91; RMSEA = .06. All standardized loadings of the five dimensions on the single second-order factor were statistically significant ranging from .60 to .91 (critical *z*-values ranging from 13.95 to 19.46), providing support for convergent validity. Thus, the composite score of employability was used in subsequent analyses ($\alpha = .89$).

*Perceived career success*

Perceived career success was measured with seven items from Bozionelos (2004) based on Gattiker and Larwood's (1986) subjective career success measure. Responses were obtained on a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 5 (*applies a great deal*). Sample items include "I am drawing a high income compared to my peers" and "I am pleased with the promotions I have received so far" ($\alpha = .70$).

*Objective career success*

Objective career success was measured in terms of (a) promotions within the organization where the respondent is currently employed (e.g., Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Seibert et al., 2001); (b) annual base salary (in euros); and (c) earnings beyond base salary, that is, bonuses (in euros). A log transformation (natural logarithm) was performed on both salary and earnings beyond base salary to correct for skewness (Gerhart & Milkovich, 1990).

### 3.2.2 | Leader-rated measures

*Leader–member exchange*

In order to assess the leader's perception of the quality of the leader–member relationship, an adapted version of LMX-7 (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) was used ($\alpha = .85$). The phrasing of the items reflected Paglis and Green's (2002) emphasis on assessing reciprocity in dual-perspective LMX measures. For the first six items, the scale anchors ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). The specific items are as follows: "To what extent do you know how satisfied this employee is with what you do?", "How well do you feel that this employee understands your problems and needs?", "How well does this employee recognize your potential as a leader?", "What are the chances that this employee would help you solve

problems in your work?", "What are the chances that this employee would 'bail you out' at his/her expense?", and "I have enough confidence in this employee that I would defend and justify his/her decisions if he/she were not present to do so". For the seventh item "In general, how would you characterize your working relationship with this employee?", the scale anchors ranged from 1 (*extremely ineffective*) to 5 (*extremely effective*).

*Employability*

To assess leader-rated employability, we once again used the revised 22-item short-form employability measure (Van der Heijden et al., 2018). It utilizes the same 6-point response format and scale anchors as the self-rated version and assesses employability's five dimensions: *occupational expertise* (e.g., "I consider this employee competent to weigh up and reason out the 'pros' and 'cons' of particular decisions on working methods, materials, and techniques in their job domain"), *anticipation and optimization* (e.g., "this employee consciously devotes attention to applying newly acquired knowledge and skills"), *personal flexibility* (e.g., "how easily would you say this employee can adapt to changes in the workplace?"), *corporate sense* (e.g., "this employee supports the operational processes within the organization"), and *balance* (e.g., "this employee achieves a balance in alternating between reaching their own work goals and supporting colleagues"). CFA results suggested that the five-factor model had a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(199) = 773.79$, $p < .001$; CFI = .95; GFI = .93; RMSEA = .06. All standardized factor loadings were statistically significant, ranging from .56 to .79 (critical *z*-values ranging from 14.40 to 25.25, $p < .05$). Second-order CFA results also yielded a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(204) = 777.77$, $p < .001$; CFI = .95; GFI = .93; RMSEA = .05. All standardized loadings of the five dimensions on the single second-order factor were statistically significant, ranging from .83 to .95 (critical *z*-values ranging from 17.84 to 24.82), providing support for convergent validity. Once again, the composite score of leader-rated employability was used in the subsequent analyses ($\alpha = .94$).

*Control variables*

We controlled for the effects of several variables that are theoretically linked to the relationships of interest (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016; Bernerth, Cole, Taylor, & Walker, 2018). In addition to controlling for country effects (dummy-coded), we also controlled for sex similarity (dummy-coded, similar = 0 and dissimilar = 1) and age similarity (operationalized as the absolute difference between the manager's and employee's age). Prior studies have shown leader–follower demographic similarity to be an important determinant in the development of LMX relationships (Bauer & Green, 1996; Epitropaki & Martin, 1999; Liden et al., 1993; Matta et al., 2015). We further controlled for mentoring in order to account for plausible alternative sponsorship explanations (Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994; Wayne et al., 1999). Respondents were asked to indicate whether they currently had a mentor (dummy-coded, Yes = 0 and No = 1).

### 3.2.3 | Analysis

We tested intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC1 and ICC2) to check potential nonindependence of the data, as some leaders in the sample evaluated more than one follower. ICC1 was .30 and ICC2 was .38 for the follower-rated LMX, whereas for the leader-rated LMX ICC1 was .08 and ICC2 was .11. With regard to employability, ICC1 was .01 and ICC2 was .02 for follower-rated employability and ICC1 was .18 and ICC2 was .23 for leader-rated employability. We therefore used complex modeling in Mplus 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012) to account for the nonindependence data and potential nesting effects due to some of the leaders evaluating more than one follower.

We tested Hypotheses 1 and 2 using polynomial regression and response surface methodology (Edwards, 1994, 2002; Edwards & Parry, 1993) using the following equation:

$$E = b_0 + b_1L + b_2F + b_3L^2 + b_4FL + b_5F^2 + e, \quad (1)$$

where *L* and *F* refer to leader-rated LMX and follower-rated LMX, respectively; *E* refers to employability (either follower-rated or leader-rated).

To test Hypothesis 3, we used the following polynomial regression equation:

$$CO = b_0 + b_1E + b_2L + b_3F + b_4L^2 + b_5FL + b_6F^2 + e, \quad (2)$$

combined with the block variable approach (Cable & Edwards, 2004; Edwards & Cable, 2009), where *CO* refers to career outcomes, *E* refers to employability (either follower-rated or leader-rated), and *L* and *F* refer to leader-rated LMX and follower-rated LMX, respectively. Each block variable summarizes the effects of its respective quadratic terms and examines the effects of the quadratic terms using a single coefficient. Each block variable is a weighted composite of five terms (*L*, *F*, $L^2$, *FL*, and $F^2$), where the weights are the unstandardized regression coefficients from the polynomial regression analyses. The path relating LMX (dis)agreement to employability is termed path "A", the path relating employability to career outcomes is termed path "B", and the path relating LMX agreement to career outcomes is termed path "C′".

The indirect effect of LMX (dis)agreement on career outcomes is the product of path A and B (AB). The total effect of LMX (dis)agreement on career outcomes is produced by adding the direct effect C′ to the indirect effect AB. We used bootstrap (Efron & Tibshirani, 1993; Stine, 1989) and constructed confidence intervals based on the bias-corrected percentile method to test the significance of the direct effects for paths A, B, and C′, and the indirect and total effects. The confidence intervals were based on estimates from 10,000 bootstrap samples. If the indirect effect is significant, employability has a mediating role on the relationship between LMX (dis)agreement and career outcomes.

As we proposed in Hypothesis 2 that leader-rated (follower-rated) employability is higher when the leader's (follower's) perception of LMX is higher than the follower's (leader's), than it is when the leader's (follower's) perception of LMX is lower than the follower's (leader's), we examined the slope and curvature of the surface along the congruence line and the incongruence line (Edwards, 1994; Edwards & Parry, 1993). For our analyses, we focused on the slope and curvature of the surface along the congruence line for Hypothesis 1 and the slope and curvature of the surface along the incongruence line for Hypothesis 2. Following Edwards (1994), we centered the *L* and *F* measures at their scale midpoints.

Linear combinations of regression coefficients from Equation 1 can be used to test the slope and curvature of the response surface along the congruence and incongruence lines (Edwards & Cable, 2009). If $b_3 - b_4 + b_5$ is less than 0, then the surface should be curved downward along the incongruence line. If the linear combinations $b_1 + b_2$ and $b_3 + b_4 + b_5$ do not differ from 0, then the surface should be flat along the congruence line. To supplement the test of the slope and curvature of the response surface along the congruence and incongruence lines, we also created plots of the response surfaces.

## 4 | RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for the variables measured are reported in Table 1.

Results of the multilevel polynomial regression analyses testing Hypotheses 1 and 2 are reported in Table 2. Figures 2 and 3 show the surface plots of the relationship between follower-rated and leader-rated LMX on follower-rated and leader-rated employability, respectively. For follower-rated and leader-rated employability, we tested two nested models. Model 1 tested the effects of individual leader and follower perceptions of LMX on employability. It included control variables and all five polynomial terms but paths for higher order terms were constrained to zero. Model 2 further tested the effects of LMX agreement over and above individual perceptions. It included control variables and all five polynomial terms, but no paths were constrained. We tested differences between the models using log-likelihood values and Satorra–Bentler chi-square difference tests (Satorra & Bentler, 2001). For follower-rated employability, Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square difference test (TRd) showed that Model 2 provided a better fit to

**TABLE 1** Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities of variables

| Variables | *M* | *SD* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Country 1 | 0.12[a] | 0.32[a] | – | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Country 2 | 0.11[a] | 0.31[a] | −.13***[a] | – | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Country 3 | 0.17[a] | 0.37[a] | −.16***[a] | −.16***[a] | – | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Country 4 | 0.17[a] | 0.38[a] | −.17***[a] | −.16***[a] | −.20***[a] | – | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Country 5 | 0.19[a] | 0.39[a] | −.18***[a] | −.17***[a] | −.21***[a] | −.22***[a] | – | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Country 6 | 0.17[a] | 0.38[a] | −.17***[a] | −.16***[a] | −.20***[a] | −.20***[a] | −.22***[a] | – | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Sex similarity | 0.36[a] | 0.48[a] | .04[a] | −.11***[a] | .02[a] | .10**[a] | .03[a] | −.03[a] | – | | | | | | | | | | |
| 8. Age similarity | 9.51[b] | 7.15[b] | −.04[b] | −.13***[b] | −.03[b] | .10**[b] | .08**[b] | .01[b] | .07*[b] | – | | | | | | | | | |
| 9. Mentoring | 0.71[a] | 0.45[a] | −.02[a] | −.11***[a] | .07*[a] | .22***[a] | −.08**[a] | −.12***[a] | .03[a] | .01[b] | – | | | | | | | | |
| 10. Follower-rated LMX | 3.65[a] | 0.72[a] | .04[a] | .17***[a] | −.11***[a] | .00[a] | −.09**[a] | −.03[a] | −.01[a] | .00[b] | −.19***[a] | (.88)[a] | | | | | | | |
| 11. Leader-rated LMX | 3.77[a] | 0.65[a] | .37***[a] | .09**[a] | −.13***[a] | −.16***[a] | −.08*[a] | −.10**[a] | .04[a] | −.05[b] | −.11***[a] | .45***[a] | (.85)[a] | | | | | | |
| 12. Follower-rated employability | 4.27[a] | 0.54[a] | .18***[a] | .14***[a] | −.10**[a] | −.03[a] | −.09**[a] | −.02[a] | .00[a] | −.01[b] | −.05[a] | .53***[a] | .39***[a] | (.89)[a] | | | | | |
| 13. Leader-rated employability | 4.32[a] | 0.70[a] | .45***[a] | .06[a] | −.08*[a] | −.01[a] | −.08*[a] | −.26***[a] | .06*[a] | −.03[b] | −.02[a] | .34***[a] | .70***[a] | .47***[a] | (.94)[a] | | | | |
| 14. Perceived career success | 3.40[a] | 0.60[a] | .09**[a] | .03[a] | −.06*[a] | .18***[a] | .02[a] | −.31***[a] | .05[a] | .03[b] | −.08**[a] | .48***[a] | .30***[a] | .40***[a] | .37***[a] | (.70)[a] | | | |
| 15. Promotions | 0.88[c] | 1.20[c] | −.10**[c] | −.05[c] | −.01[c] | −.05[c] | .00[c] | .17***[c] | −.01[c] | −.04[d] | .01[c] | .02[c] | .03[c] | .10**[c] | .02[c] | .08**[c] | – | | |
| 16. Salary | 9.74[e] | 1.13[e] | .22***[e] | −.18***[e] | −.03[e] | .33***[e] | −.57***[e] | .22***[e] | .03[e] | −.05[f] | .20***[e] | −.01[e] | .05[e] | .11**[e] | .11**[e] | .06[e] | .07[g] | – | |
| 17. Bonuses | 7.33[h] | 1.68[h] | −.12*[h] | .11*[h] | −.38***[h] | .21***[h] | −.18***[h] | .33***[h] | −.09[h] | .00[i] | −.10*[h] | .23***[h] | .19***[h] | .16**[h] | .00[h] | .30***[h] | .16**[i] | .27***[j] | – |

*Note.* Due to missing values, the analyses are based on different samples.[a]$N = 967$; [b]$N = 963$; [c]$N = 960$; [d]$N = 956$; [e]$N = 863$; [f]$N = 859$; [g]$N = 858$; [h]$N = 386$; [i]$N = 385$; [j]$N = 353$.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

**TABLE 2** Relationship between follower-rated LMX, leader-rated LMX, and employability

| | Follower-rated employability | | Leader-rated employability | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Dimensions** | **1** | **2** | **1** | **2** |
| Intercept | 3.710**(0.070) | 3.654**(0.071) | 3.577**(0.073) | 3.559**(0.073) |
| Country 1 | 0.329**(0.065) | 0.332**(0.064) | 0.614**(0.062) | 0.626**(0.064) |
| Country 2 | 0.257**(0.069) | 0.243**(0.070) | 0.165*(0.077) | 0.161*(0.077) |
| Country 3 | 0.138*(0.067) | 0.158*(0.067) | 0.170*(0.066) | 0.176**(0.066) |
| Country 4 | 0.149*(0.064) | 0.159*(0.064) | 0.292**(0.067) | 0.296**(0.066) |
| Country 5 | 0.133*(0.061) | 0.149*(0.061) | 0.131*(0.063) | 0.138*(0.063) |
| Country 6 | 0.202**(0.065) | 0.217**(0.065) | −0.137*(0.063) | −0.135*(0.063) |
| Sex similarity | −0.011(0.030) | −0.011(0.030) | 0.024(0.031) | 0.024(0.030) |
| Age similarity | 0.001(0.002) | 0.001(0.002) | 0.000(0.002) | 0.000(0.002) |
| Mentoring | 0.078*(0.034) | 0.083*(0.034) | 0.043(0.037) | 0.045(0.036) |
| *L* | 0.131**(0.031) | 0.181**(0.051) | 0.648**(0.032) | 0.690**(0.048) |
| *F* | 0.348**(0.028) | 0.382**(0.041) | 0.061*(0.029) | 0.063(0.053) |

(Continues)

**TABLE 2** (Continued)

| | Follower-rated employability | | Leader-rated employability | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Dimensions** | **1** | **2** | **1** | **2** |
| $L^2$ | | −0.019(0.038) | | −0.031(0.040) |
| *FL* | | −0.115**(0.040) | | −0.033(0.043) |
| $F^2$ | | 0.082**(0.023) | | 0.031(0.022) |
| Log-likelihood value | −586.383 | −574.236 | −610.948 | −608.569 |
| *df* | 13 | 16 | 13 | 16 |
| Incongruence line | | | | |
| Slope: $b_1 - b_2$ | | −0.201* | | 0.627** |
| Curvature: $b_3 - b_4 + b_5$ | | 0.178* | | 0.034 |
| Congruence line | | | | |
| Slope: $b_1 + b_2$ | | 0.563** | | 0.753** |
| Curvature: $b_3 + b_4 + b_5$ | | −0.052 | | −0.033 |

*Note.* $N = 963$. *L* = leader-rated LMX, *F* = follower-rated LMX. Unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses) are reported.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

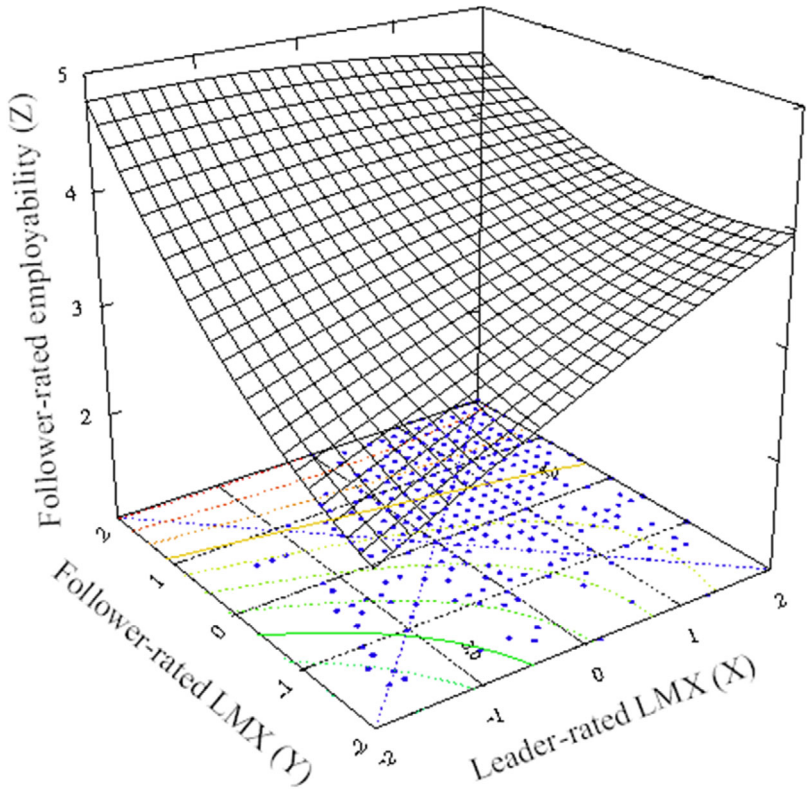


**FIGURE 2** Leader-rated LMX and follower-rated LMX predicting follower-rated employability

the data than Model 1 (TRd = 18.635; *df* difference = 3, $p < .001$), whereas for leader-rated employability, Model 2 did not provide a better fit to the data than Model 1 (TRd = 3.558; *df* difference = 3, ns). Although the significant TRd for follower-rated employability indicates a possible nonlinear relationship, the nonsignificant TRd in the case of leader-rated employability provides a first indication for a linear relationship in accordance with our Hypothesis 2B.

Hypothesis 1 stated that employability would be higher when the leader is in agreement with the follower at a high level of LMX than it would be when the leader is in agreement with the follower at a low level of LMX. Thus, employability would be higher when leader and follower LMX perceptions were both high than when both were low. This would be supported if the surface increased and was not curved along the congruence line. Our results provide support for Hypotheses 1A and 1B as the curvature of the surface along the congruence line was not significant and as the slope of the surface along the congruence line was positive and significant with follower-rated employability as the outcome (curvature = –.052, $p > .05$; slope = .563, $p < .01$) and with leader-rated employability as the outcome (curvature = –.033, $p > .05$; slope = .753, $p < .01$). This can also be seen from the surface plots in Figures 2 and 3, which show that employability increases along the congruence line. Depicted on the floor of the graph, the congruence line runs from the near corner to the far corner and the incongruence line runs from the left corner to the right corner.

Hypothesis 2A stated that follower-rated employability would be higher when the follower's perception of LMX is higher than the leader's, than it would be when the follower's perception of LMX is lower than the leader's. The curvature of the surface along the incongruence line was significant and the slope of the surface along the incongruence line was negative and significant (curvature = .178, $p < .05$; slope = –.201, $p < .05$). This is also depicted in the surface plot in Figure 2, which shows that follower-rated employability contrary to expectations decreases a little bit as follower-rated LMX increases toward leader-rated LMX and then, in line with expectations, before follower-rated LMX reaches

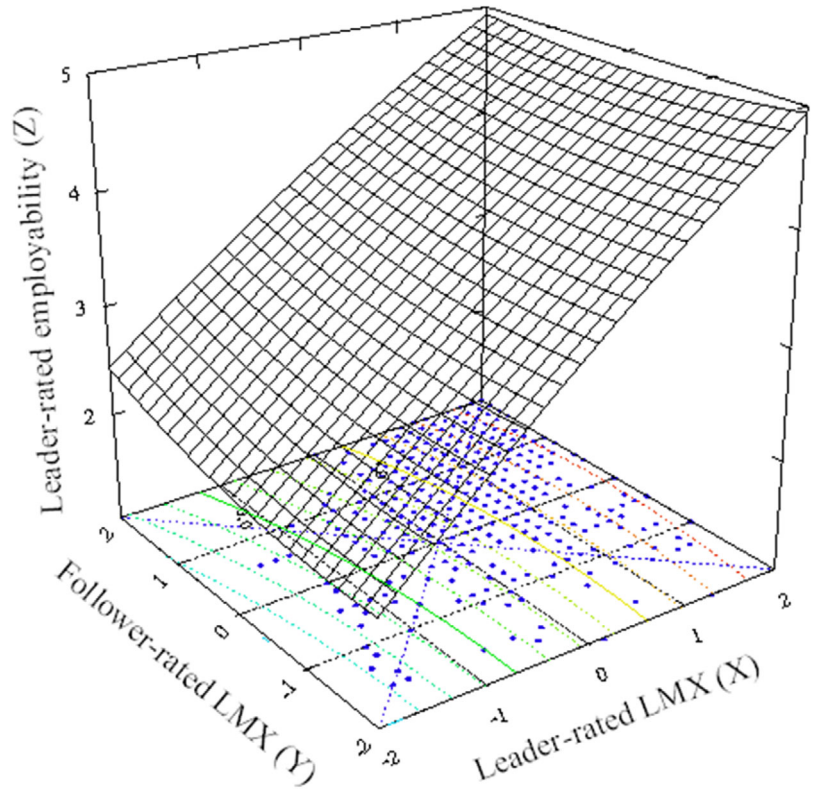


**FIGURE 3** Leader-rated LMX and follower-rated LMX predicting leader-rated employability

leader-rated LMX, follower-rated employability increases and continues to increase as follower-rated LMX exceeds leader-rated LMX. Overall, this provides partial support for Hypothesis 2A.

Hypothesis 2B stated that leader-rated employability would be higher when the leader's perception of LMX is higher than the follower's, than it would be when the leader's perception of LMX is lower than the follower's. The curvature of the surface along the incongruence line was not significant and the slope of the surface along the incongruence line was positive and significant (curvature = .034, $p > .05$; slope = .627, $p < .01$). As can be seen on the surface plot in Figure 3, leader-rated employability increases as leader-rated LMX increases toward follower-rated LMX and leader-rated employability continues to increase as leader-rated LMX exceeds follower-rated LMX. As such, leader-rated employability is higher when the leader's perception of LMX is higher than the follower's, than it is when the leader's perception of LMX is lower than the follower's. This provides support for Hypothesis 2B.

Hypotheses 3A and 3B stated that follower-rated and leader-rated employability would mediate the relationship between LMX (dis)agreement and (a) perceived career success, (b) promotions, (c) salary, and (d) bonuses. The effects in Table 3 show that LMX (dis)agreement is significantly and positively related to both follower-rated and leader-rated employability (Path A). Follower-rated employability is significantly and positively related to perceived career success (.210, $p < .01$), promotions (.149, $p < .01$), salary (.114, $p < .01$), and bonuses (.113, $p < .01$), (Path B) when LMX (dis)agreement is controlled for. All indirect effects (AB) are significant ($p < .01$), indicating that follower-rated employability has a mediating role in the relationship between LMX (dis)agreement and all four career success outcomes.

Leader-rated employability is significantly and positively related to perceived career success (.186, $p < .01$), promotions (.137, $p < .01$), and salary (.086, $p < .01$), but not to bonuses (−.068, $p > .05$), (Path B) when LMX (dis)agreement is controlled for. All indirect effects (AB), except for the indirect effect for bonuses, are significant ($p < .01$). Thus,

**TABLE 3** Relationship between LMX (dis)agreement, employability, perceived career success, promotions, salary, and bonuses

| Effects | Follower-rated employability | Leader-rated employability |
|---|---|---|
| **Effects related to perceived career success (PCS)** | | |
| Effect of LMX (dis)agreement on employability (A) | 0.570** (0.855, 1.137) | 0.632** (0.889, 1.102) |
| Effect of employability on PCS (B) | 0.210** (0.134, 0.325) | 0.186** (0.086, 0.231) |
| Effect of LMX (dis)agreement on PCS (C′) | 0.368** (0.751, 1.264) | 0.416** (0.797, 1.212) |
| Indirect effect of LMX (dis)agreement on PCS (AB) | 0.120** (0.134, 0.337) | 0.118**(0.085, 0.234) |
| Total effect of LMX (dis)agreement on PCS (AB + C′) | 0.488** (1.011, 1.455) | 0.534**(0.966, 1.353) |
| **Effects related to promotions** | | |
| Effect of LMX (dis)agreement on employability (A) | 0.572** (0.859, 1.142) | 0.633** (0.891, 1.108) |
| Effect of employability on promotions (B) | 0.149** (0.171, 0.491) | 0.137** (0.056, 0.391) |
| Effect of LMX (dis)agreement on promotions (C′) | 0.067 (−0.069, 2.333) | 0.033 (−1.030, 3.167) |
| Indirect effect of LMX (dis)agreement on promotions (AB) | 0.085** (0.171, 0.504) | 0.087** (0.058, 0.398) |
| Total effect of LMX (dis)agreement on promotions (AB + C′) | 0.152* (0.223, 2.687) | 0.120 (−0.820, 3.417) |
| **Effects related to salary** | | |
| Effect of LMX (dis)agreement on employability (A) | 0.561** (0.839, 1.157) | 0.639** (0.881, 1.117) |
| Effect of employability on salary (B) | 0.114** (0.071, 0.411) | 0.086** (0.006, 0.284) |
| Effect of LMX (dis)agreement on salary (C′) | 0.088** (0.111, 1.958) | 0.054* (0.018, 2.061) |
| Indirect effect of LMX (dis)agreement on salary (AB) | 0.064** (0.072, 0.418) | 0.055** (0.007, 0.290) |
| Total effect of LMX (dis)agreement on salary (AB + C′) | 0.152** (0.254, 2.316) | 0.109* (0.102, 2.255) |
| **Effects related to bonuses** | | |
| Effect of LMX (dis)agreement on employability (A) | 0.552** (0.786, 1.228) | 0.645** (0.840, 1.142) |
| Effect of employability on bonuses (B) | 0.113** (0.040, 0.748) | −0.068 (−0.465, 0.095) |
| Effect of LMX (dis)agreement on bonuses (C′) | 0.203** (0.331, 1.637) | 0.287** (0.397, 1.606) |
| Indirect effect of LMX (dis)agreement on bonuses (AB) | 0.062** (0.044, 0.774) | −0.044 (−0.470, 0.093) |
| Total effect of LMX (dis)agreement on bonuses (AB + C′) | 0.265** (0.665, 2.097) | 0.243** (0.380, 1.262) |

*Note.* $N = 963$ for effects related to perceived career success, $N = 956$ for effects related to promotions, $N = 859$ for effects related to salary, and $N = 385$ for effects related to bonuses. LMX = leader-member exchange, PCS = perceived career success. LMX (dis)agreement refers to the block variable of the five terms ($L$, $F$, $L^2$, $FL$, and $F^2$). Standardized regression coefficients are reported. Bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals are shown in parentheses. For nonsignificant effects, the 95% confidence interval is shown.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

leader-rated employability has a mediating role in the relationship between LMX (dis)agreement and perceived career success, promotions, and salary but not bonuses.

Table 3 further shows that LMX (dis)agreement is still significantly and positively related to perceived career success, salary, and bonuses, but not to promotions (Path C′) when controlling for follower-rated or leader-rated employability. Thus, we find that follower-rated employability mediates the effect of LMX (dis)agreement on perceived career success, promotions, salary, and bonuses, and that leader-rated employability mediates the effect of LMX (dis)agreement on perceived career success, promotions, and salary. Thus, Hypothesis 3A is supported for perceived career success, promotions, salary, and bonuses, whereas Hypothesis 3B is supported for perceived career success, promotions, and salary but not supported for bonuses.

## 5 | SUPPLEMENTAL ANALYSES

Although our paper mainly focuses on the effects of LMX agreement on employability and the mediating role of employability in the relationship between LMX (dis)agreement and career outcomes, it is still of theoretical and empirical interest to present the main effects of LMX agreement on perceived career success, promotions, salary, and bonuses, given the absence of prior studies. Based on theories of social exchange (Blau, 1964) and sponsorship (Rosenbaum, 1979) presented in earlier sections, one could argue the following: First, perceived career success, promotions, salary, and bonuses will be higher when both the leader and the follower agree that their LMX relationship quality is high (instead of low). Second, perceived career success will be higher when the follower's perception of LMX is higher than the leader's, than it is when the follower's perception of LMX is lower than the leader's. Third, promotions, salary, and bonuses will be higher when the leader's perception of LMX is higher than the follower's, than it is when the leader's perception of LMX is lower than the follower's. When the leader's perception of LMX is higher than the follower's and the leader views the relationship as primarily socioemotional, they will be more likely to sponsor the follower to achieve career advancement and monetary rewards. Results from the supplemental polynomial regression analyses for perceived career success, promotions, salary, and bonuses are reported in Table 4.

As can be seen in Table 4, results for perceived career success show that the curvature of the surface along the congruence line was not significant and the slope of the surface along the congruence line was positive and significant (curvature = −.026, $p > .05$; slope = .494, $p < .01$) indicating that perceived career success increases along the congruence line. This can also be seen from the surface plot in Figure 4, which shows that perceived career success is higher when both the leader and the follower agree that their relationship quality is high (instead of low). The curvature of the surface along the incongruence line was not significant and the slope of the surface along the incongruence line was negative and significant (curvature = .104, $p > .05$; slope = −.244, $p < .01$). This is also depicted in the surface plot in Figure 4, which shows that perceived career success is higher when the follower's perception of LMX is higher than the leader's, than it is when the follower's perception of LMX is lower than the leader's.

Regarding promotions, the curvature of the surface along the congruence line was not significant and the slope of the surface along the congruence line was positive and significant (curvature = −.054, $p > .05$; slope = .226, $p < .05$), indicating that promotions increase along the congruence line. This is also supported by Figure 5, which shows that promotions are higher when both the leader and the follower agree that their LMX relationship quality is high (instead of low). Although the curvature of the surface along the incongruence line was not significant and the response surface in Figure 5 indicates that the number of promotions is higher when the leader's perception of LMX is higher than the follower's, than it is when the leader's perception of LMX is lower than the follower's, the slope of the surface along the incongruence line was not significant (curvature = −.012, $p > .05$; slope = .227, $p > .05$). As such, there is no support for the second part of our argument, that is, the number of promotions is higher when the leader's perception of LMX is higher than the follower's, than it is when the leader's perception of LMX is lower than the follower's.

With regard to salary, the curvature of the surface along the congruence line was not significant and the slope of the surface along the congruence line was negative and not significant (curvature = .038, $p > .05$; slope = −.011,

**TABLE 4** Supplemental analyses: Relationship between follower-rated LMX, leader-rated LMX, and career outcomes

| Dimensions | Perceived career success | Promotions | Salary | Bonuses |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 3.221**(0.071) | 0.837**(0.197) | 9.821**(0.145) | 7.435**(0.321) |
| Country 1 | −0.053(0.066) | −0.523**(0.185) | 0.531**(0.127) | −1.657*(0.698) |
| Country 2 | −0.206**(0.077) | −0.319(0.187) | −0.841**(0.195) | −0.255(0.340) |
| Country 3 | −0.095(0.059) | −0.117(0.186) | −0.371*(0.170) | −1.475**(0.314) |
| Country 4 | 0.178**(0.064) | −0.195(0.174) | 0.490**(0.131) | 0.742*(0.302) |
| Country 5 | −0.029(0.059) | −0.059(0.179) | −1.502**(0.148) | −0.823**(0.275) |
| Country 6 | −0.488**(0.058) | 0.373*(0.188) | 0.313*(0.125) | 0.899**(0.290) |
| Sex similarity | 0.019(0.033) | −0.017(0.076) | 0.059(0.056) | −0.280(0.145) |
| Age similarity | 0.002(0.002) | −0.007(0.005) | −0.008*(0.004) | −0.002(0.012) |
| Mentoring | −0.089*(0.038) | 0.120(0.094) | 0.303**(0.074) | −0.114(0.168) |
| *L* | 0.125*(0.053) | 0.227*(0.100) | 0.051(0.055) | 0.213(0.153) |
| *F* | 0.369**(0.042) | −0.001(0.090) | −0.062(0.059) | −0.069(0.175) |
| $L^2$ | −0.016(0.040) | −0.065(0.060) | 0.011(0.041) | 0.071(0.128) |
| *FL* | −0.065(0.048) | −0.021(0.099) | 0.078(0.056) | 0.126(0.167) |
| $F^2$ | 0.054(0.032) | 0.033(0.086) | −0.052(0.052) | 0.247*(0.117) |
| Incongruence line | | | | |
| Slope: $b_1 - b_2$ | −0.244** | 0.227 | 0.113 | 0.282 |
| Curvature: $b_3 - b_4 + b_5$ | 0.104 | −0.012 | −0.119 | 0.192 |
| Congruence line | | | | |
| Slope: $b_1 + b_2$ | 0.494** | 0.226* | −0.011 | 0.143 |
| Curvature: $b_3 + b_4 + b_5$ | −0.026 | −0.054 | 0.038 | 0.444* |

*Note.* $N = 963$ for effects related to perceived career success, $N = 956$ for effects related to promotions, $N = 859$ for effects related to salary, and $N = 385$ for effects related to bonuses. *L* = leader-rated LMX, *F* = follower-rated LMX. Unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses) are reported.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

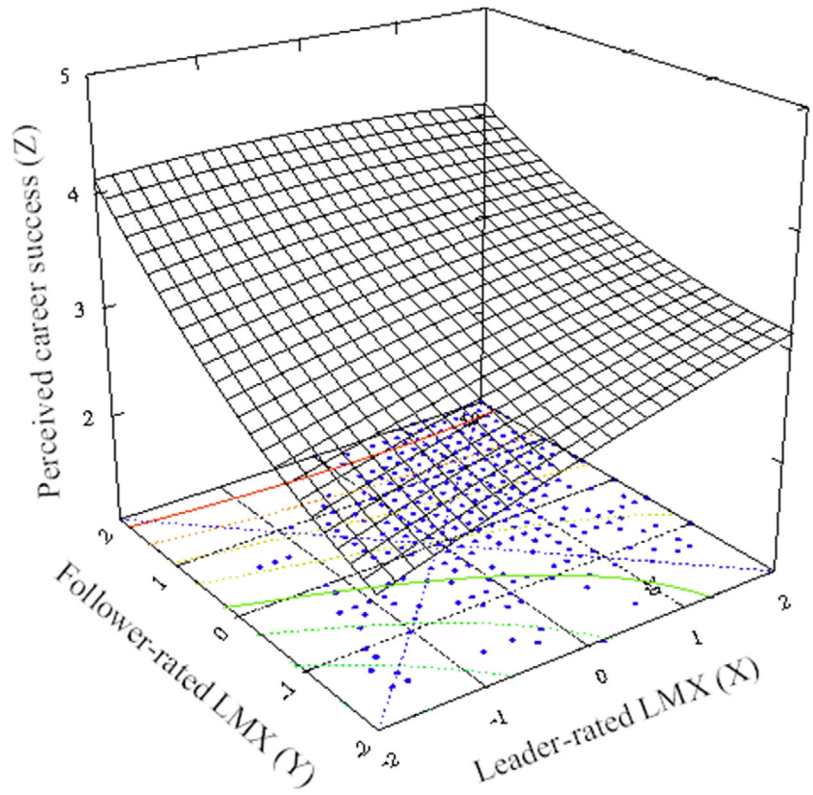


**FIGURE 4** Supplemental analyses: Leader-rated LMX and follower-rated LMX predicting perceived career success

$p > .05$), indicating that salary does not increase along the congruence line, which is also indicated by the surface plot in Figure 6. Furthermore, the curvature of the surface along the incongruence line was not significant and the slope of the surface along the incongruence line was not significant (curvature = −.119, $p > .05$; slope = .113, $p > .05$). Thus, neither the argument that salary is higher when the leader and the follower share the view of their LMX relationship as high nor the argument that salary is higher when the leader's perception of LMX is higher than the follower's, than it is when the leader's perception of LMX is lower than the follower's, is supported with our data.

Finally regarding bonuses, the curvature of the surface along the congruence line was significant and the slope of the surface along the congruence line was positive but not significant (curvature = .444, $p < .05$; slope = .143, $p > .05$), meaning that bonuses do not increase along the congruence line, which is also depicted in the response surface in Figure 7. Furthermore, the curvature of the surface along the incongruence line was not significant and the slope of the surface along the incongruence line was not significant (curvature = .192, $p > .05$; slope = .282, $p > .05$). Thus, similar to salary results, neither the argument that bonuses are higher when leader and follower agree that their LMX relationship is high nor the argument that bonuses are higher when the leader's perception of LMX is higher than the follower's, than they are when the leader's perception of LMX is lower than the follower's, is supported in this study.

In general, the results of the supplemental analyses show that perceived career success and promotions are higher when the leader and the follower are in agreement about their LMX relationship being high (instead of low). They further show that perceived career success is higher when the follower's perception of LMX is higher than the leader's, than it is when the follower's perception of LMX is lower than the leader's. No support was found for the argument that salary and bonuses are higher when both leader and follower agree that their relationship is high (instead of low) or

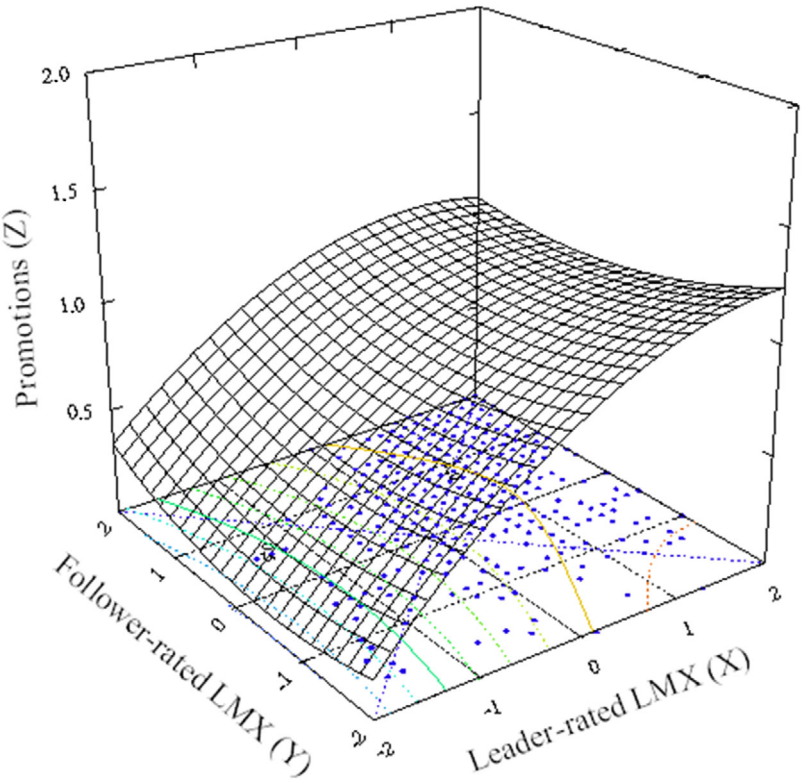


**FIGURE 5** Supplemental analyses: Leader-rated LMX and follower-rated LMX predicting promotions

for the argument that promotions and financial career outcomes are higher when the leader's perception of LMX is higher than the follower's, than they are when the leader's perception of LMX is lower than the follower's.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

Our study responds to the recent calls to examine LMX agreement as a substantive variable (Erdogan & Bauer, 2014; Matta & Dyne, 2015; Zhou & Schriesheim, 2009, 2010) and attempts to cast light on the relationship between LMX agreement and extrinsic–subjective career outcomes (both follower-rated and leader-rated employability and perceived career success) and extrinsic–objective career outcomes (promotions, salary, and bonuses). By adopting a truly dyadic, reciprocal exchange perspective (Paglis & Green, 2002), we assessed perceptions of leader and follower mutual contributions to the LMX relationship. Our polynomial regression results showed follower-rated and leader-rated employability to be higher when the leader was in agreement with the follower at a high level of LMX (vs. a low level of LMX). We further found leader-rated employability to be higher when the leader's perceptions of LMX exceeded those of the follower. When the leader's assessment of the follower's contributions to the LMX relationship was higher than the follower's evaluation of the leader's contributions, the leader's view of the follower's employability was also higher. These findings provide support for a sponsorship perspective (Rosenbaum, 1979; Wayne et al., 1999). In particular, the more the leader views their relationship with the follower as socioemotional and a true partnership (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), the more they are likely to sponsor the follower's career within the organization (Sparrowe & Liden, 2005; Wayne et al., 1999). The leader will provide career guidance and advice, development opportunities, and stretching assignments that can facilitate the follower's learning and growth and increase their attractiveness in the job market.

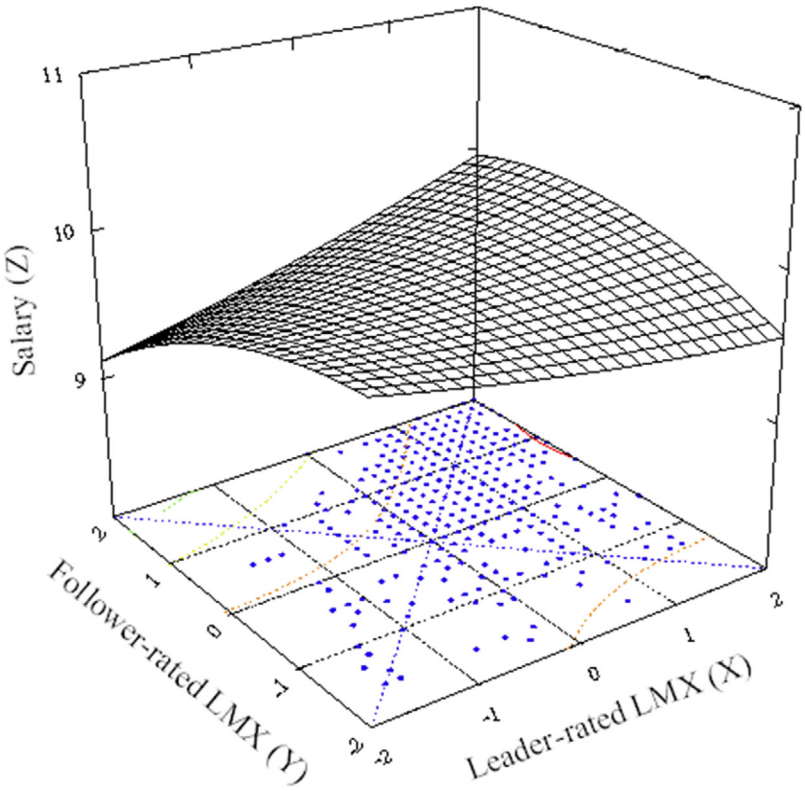


**FIGURE 6** Supplemental analyses: Leader-rated LMX and follower-rated LMX predicting salary

Importantly, this employability boost is likely to happen even if the follower does not share the leader's view of a high-quality LMX relationship. Our findings indicate that it is the leader's perception of the relationship that drives related sponsorship outcomes such as employability. As Matta et al. (2015) argue, given that followers are generally dependent on the leader, who controls various resources, the leader's perceptions of the LMX relationship may dominate and render the follower's perspective irrelevant. Leaders' assessments of employability (as well as decisions regarding tangible outcome allocation) are likely to be driven by their own perceptions of LMX quality. In this specific case (see Quadrant 4 in Figure 1), leader–follower disagreement, that is, the incongruence of LMX perceptions, is not detrimental for follower outcomes but, on the contrary, appears to have beneficial effects.

We also found follower-rated employability to be higher when the follower's perception of LMX was higher than the leader's. Similar to leaders' perceptions, followers' assessments of employability were driven by their own perceptions of LMX quality. High perceptions of the LMX relationship led to more positive views of one's own competencies, marketability, and career opportunities. However, Figure 2 revealed an interesting pattern of incongruence effects with regard to employability. As mentioned in the results section, contrary to the hypotheses, follower-rated employability dropped slightly as LMX increased toward the dyadic partner's LMX and then again started to increase just before full congruence was achieved, in accordance with expectations. One possible explanation for this unexpected drop may lie in the experience of LMX ambivalence in that midpoint. As discussed by Lee, Thomas, Martin, and Guillaume (2019), relational ambivalence (coexistence of both positive and negative thoughts about the relationship) has been associated with conflicting thoughts, aversive feelings, and self-doubt (van Harreveld, Nohlen, & Schneider, 2015). Across three studies, Lee et al. (2019) showed that LMX ambivalence had a negative effect on performance and led to more negative affect. It is thus possible that we tap into LMX ambivalence when we observe this drop, but we cannot verify it empirically in this study. This could be an interesting question for future research to explore.

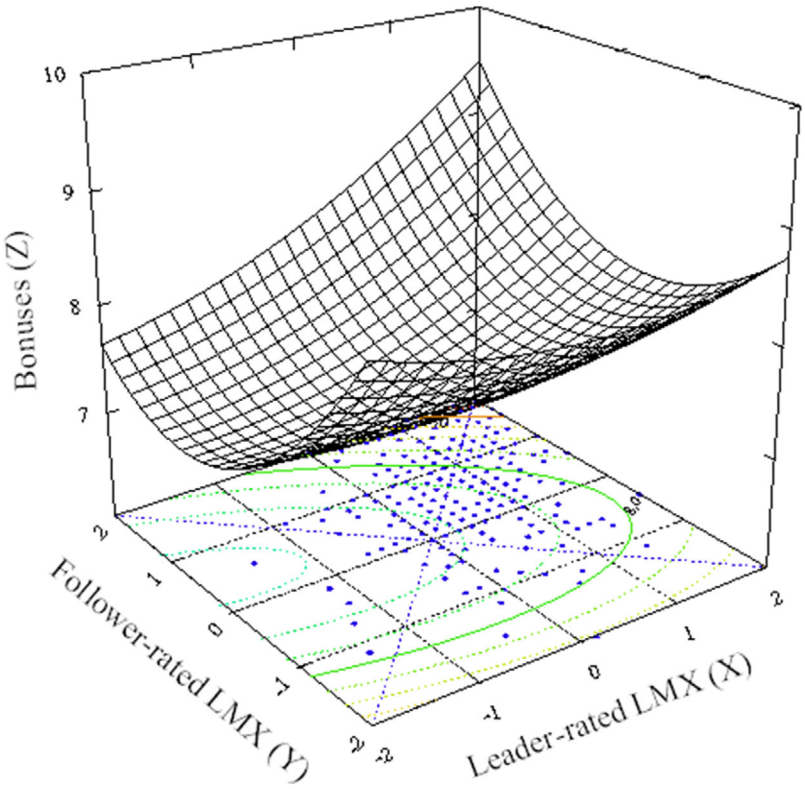


**FIGURE 7** Supplemental analyses: Leader-rated LMX and follower-rated LMX predicting bonuses

Our findings further provide support for the mediating role of follower-rated and leader-rated employability in the relationship between LMX (dis)agreement and perceived career success as well as extrinsic–objective outcomes such as promotions, salary, and bonuses. Support was found for the mediating role of follower-rated employability in the relationship between LMX (dis)agreement and all four outcomes (i.e., perceived career success, promotions, salary, and bonuses). Regarding the mediating role of leader-rated employability, support was generally provided in the case of perceived career success, promotions, and salary but not in the case of bonuses. Employability thus emerges as an important proximal outcome of LMX and LMX agreement and as a key mediating mechanism in the relationship between LMX (dis)agreement and more distal career success outcomes such as promotions and salaries. It also offers an alternative explanation for the mixed findings of past research concerning the relationship of LMX with objective career outcomes and highlights the need for future research to investigate theory-driven mediating mechanisms of this complex relationship.

Overall, our findings contribute to the LMX research, employability, and career literatures. Similar to the earlier studies on LMX agreement, our results highlight the need to treat LMX agreement as a substantive variable that has important implications for career outcomes. LMX quality is definitely important for a person's career (Kraimer et al., 2015), but without the concept of agreement, we do not get the full picture of this complex relationship. Although the case in which both leaders and followers agree that their relationship is of high quality is relatively straightforward in terms of employability implications, our study shows that the possibility of disagreement is not always a bad thing. For example, leader-rated employability outcomes were found to be better when the leader's perception of the relationship was higher than the follower's. Thus, LMX research on career outcomes can advance by examining both LMX quality and LMX agreement. In general, our study shows that both LMX agreement and employability are important for perceived career success and objective career outcomes.

## 6.1 | Practical implications

In addition to theory contributions, our findings also have practical implications. Prior scholarly work on LMX has emphasized the importance of developing high-quality relationships with multiple work group members for a series of attitudinal and performance-related outcomes (e.g., Matta et al., 2015) as well as career outcomes (e.g., Kraimer et al., 2015). Our findings support these recommendations and further highlight the important role that LMX agreement can play for both. Our results especially show that seeing "eye-to-eye" in leader–follower relationships is of paramount importance for both leader and follower assessments of a person's potential and attractiveness in the internal and external job market (e.g., Raghuram et al., 2017). In dyads, where both the leader and the follower share the view that their relationship is socioemotional and of high quality, followers have the chance to "flourish" professionally, to capitalize more on the developmental assignments and learning opportunities offered to them by the leader, to increase their skills and competencies, and have the confidence to seek out new challenges and advancement opportunities.

Seeing "eye-to-eye" is thus likely to have important implications for talent management and "high-potential" organizational programs (e.g., Finkelstein, Costanza, & Goodwin, 2018). A core element of such programs is a focus on employees with high potential (HiPos) to succeed in key positions in the organization in the future, and direct leaders play an important role in the HiPo designation process. As Finkelstein et al. (2018) stress, "employees first have to be championed by their managers in order to be considered for HiPo designation" (p. 6). As a result, LMX agreement or LMX disagreement in the form of the leader viewing the quality of the relationship as higher than the follower (Quadrant 4) will critically influence the HiPo designation process. Followers sharing a high-LMX view with their leader are more likely to be identified as HiPos and be offered a broad range of organization-wide career development opportunities that transcend the boundaries of the leader's work group.

Our results also showed that followers in dyads where there was asymmetry of perceptions, and specifically those wherein the leader had higher LMX perceptions than the follower, were also rated by the leader as having high levels of employability and potential. It is thus possible that they will also be identified as HiPos, but they may not embrace it as a unique career opportunity due to lack of trust and possibly doubting the leader's underlying motives for championing them. Open communication is critical, and leaders should strive to communicate their view of the relationship with each of their followers rather than automatically assume that the follower shares the same view. Respectful inquiry (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018) in leader–follower dyads can help minimize the asymmetry in relational perceptions and allow followers, leaders, and organizations to reap the career and talent management benefits of LMX agreement.

## 6.2 | Limitations and suggestions for future research

Our research design has several strengths, including the use of both leader and follower ratings that alleviate concerns of common method bias. Measuring both sides of the LMX coin by capturing dyadic perceptions of *mutual* contributions to the relationship rather than the leader's contributions alone (Paglis & Green, 2002) is an important strength of our study. By examining both parties' perceptions of each other's delivery of value to the relationship, our study offers a more complete view of the dyadic phenomenon (Kim et al., 2020; Krasikova & LeBreton, 2012) and its implications for career outcomes. The use of a large sample of ICT professionals from seven European countries is also a strength of the study. Still, certain limitations need to be noted. First, although prior studies have argued for employability as an antecedent of objective career outcomes (Bozionelos et al., 2016; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006; Van der Heijden et al., 2009), our research design does not allow assertions about causality, as all measures were collected within the same time frame. Second, perceived career success and objective career measures such as promotions, salary, and bonuses were self-reported and the possibility of subjective bias cannot be excluded (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999). Third, the even-numbered rating format of the employability scale that excludes a midpoint and the use of differential anchors for its subscales need to be acknowledged as possible limitations. The

advantages and disadvantages of even-numbered scales that lack a midpoint have been the topic of an active debate in the psychometric literature (e.g., Kulas & Stachowski, 2013; Nadler, Weston, & Voyles, 2015). Recent studies have shown no advantage of odd-numbered Likert scales (such as the commonly used 5- and 7-point ones) over matched even-numbered (such as 6-point) scales (e.g., Simms, Zelazny, Williams, & Bernstein, 2019). However, the differential anchors used for the employability subscales may still have introduced some bias in our data. Choosing anchors that have equal intervals is important in order to avoid systematic error (Spector, 1976). The conceptual distance between some of the anchors of the subscales (e.g., between "sometimes" and "fairly often" or between "fairly badly" and "not very well") may not have been easy for respondents to understand and possibly introduced some measurement error (Casper, Edwards, Wallace, Landis, & Fife, 2020). Fourth, missing values in certain variables such as bonuses significantly reduced the sample size in some of the analyses and this is a limitation of the present study.

Furthermore, sponsorship, although an applicable theoretical framework in the context of our research and widely used by prior research on LMX and career outcomes (Kraimer et al., 2015), could not be fully established given that we did not have a supervisory career mentoring variable in our dataset. Prior research utilizing a sponsorship perspective (e.g., Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994; Wayne et al., 1999) had measured both LMX and supervisory mentoring and found differential relationships with career outcomes. For example, Scandura and Schriesheim (1994) found supervisory career mentoring but not LMX to predict salary growth rate and promotions, whereas Wayne et al. (1999) found member-rated LMX but not supervisory mentoring to predict salary increase 18 months later. Of additional interest is Scandura and Schriesheim's (1994) finding that supervisors could distinguish between LMX and career mentoring toward a specific member, but members did not distinguish between LMX and career mentoring received from the supervisor. This has implications for LMX agreement and career research, as it is possible that leaders can distinguish between different forms of sponsorship (LMX and mentoring), whereas followers may have more global and holistic perceptions of sponsorship from their leader.

Future research can test not only sponsorship but also contest-mobility perspectives in this context. In addition to sponsored mobility, Rosenbaum (1979) had described a contest-mobility norm representing a merit-based system in which upward mobility in organizations is a function of a person's skills and effort. As Kraimer et al. (2015) have argued, LMX could fit both sponsored- and contest-mobility norms. Time is a critical parameter in that regard. Leaders may originally choose to sponsor select members based on similarity, identity fit, liking, or other non-merit-related characteristics but as the relationship develops, the member's hard work and performance may influence the leader's perceptions. Career outcomes may thus be the result of both leader sponsorship and follower merit. Longitudinal research can measure LMX agreement, supervisory mentoring (from both leader and follower perspectives), employability, and career outcomes across multiple time points to empirically contrast sponsorship and contest-mobility perspectives.

Future research can examine not only objective agreement—as we did here—but also subjective agreement of LMX quality. Research on LMX differentiation, for example, has highlighted the importance of examining not only objective differentiation via within-group variability calculations or relative LMX standing but also individual perceptions of differentiation (e.g., Epitropaki et al., 2016; Hooper & Martin, 2008; Martin, Thomas, Legood, & Russo, 2018). Future research can also increase the scope of career outcomes to further include intrinsic–subjective outcomes of LMX agreement such as career satisfaction (Kraimer et al., 2015).

Overall, our study demonstrates the importance of examining LMX agreement for career outcomes, both extrinsic–subjective in the form of employability and perceived career success, and extrinsic–objective in the form of promotions, salary, and bonuses. We hope that future research adds to this fruitful line of inquiry.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the Action Editor John Kammeyer-Mueller and the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and valuable suggestions that significantly improved our work. An early version of this paper was presented in the 2019 annual meeting of the Academy of Management in Boston.

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**How to cite this article:** Epitropaki O, Marstand AF, Van der Heijden B, et al. What are the career implications of "seeing eye to eye"? Examining the role of leader–member exchange (LMX) agreement on employability and career outcomes. *Personnel Psychology*. 2020;1–32. https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12432